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Transmedia Storytelling in the Age of New Media

Abstract

Transmedia storytelling, the telling of a single story across several different types of digital media, has been an avenue for both content creators and marketers to captivate audiences and draw in potential customers. With the introduction of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2008, franchise entertainment is now built on intertwining Hollywood-budgeted films with smaller-scale TV shows, comic books, webseries, and novels. Alongside this growth in the transmedia market, high quality content creation has become more accessible for independent storytellers with the spread of high-speed Internet, as well as the increasing affordability of gear and software. Now, in 2017, the consumer market is being introduced to more niche digital technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality. As this type of technology continues to progress and online media is being used more and more, how will the transmedia industry be affected? This research project aims to go into depth on the past, present, and future of transmedia content by gaining insight from Los Angeles-based transmedia creators on how they are implementing these new platforms into their storytelling workflows.
Introduction

Within the past decade, the entertainment industry has fully embraced a newfound type of franchise entertainment. Starting with Marvel’s creation of the Marvel Cinematic Universe with 2008’s *Iron Man*, movies have started to tie in with other films, TV shows, comic books, web series, and novels. In order to consume an entire storyline, viewers interact with a variety of media formats, and as a result, gain a profound sense of immersion. This type of franchise entertainment is what is known as transmedia storytelling: the telling of a story across several different types of media (Phillips, 6). In the world of transmedia, consuming one source of media is merely a piece of the puzzle, inching one step closer to the full realization of a narrative. For some companies, transmedia is a great avenue for advertisement. As an example, Telltale Games is a video game developer widely known for producing game adaptations of current popular franchises such as *The Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones*. Due to the fact that they focus on adaptations rather than original IPs, they are able to maximize their profits through brand recognition and play a part in the creation of new transmedia content (Stang, 2). While transmedia has been used to increase monetary gains for big businesses in this way, some transmedia producers have used the art form purely for its ability to provide an all-encompassing experience for its viewers.

In her book *A Creator’s Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms*, author and transmedia creator Andrea Phillips breaks down both the marketing and narrative uses of transmedia. When transactions are intentionally brought forward to the consumer, transmedia experiences are commonly treated as pure marketing campaigns. One of her projects, *Perplex City*, was an online experience that was
completely free to access, but included a variety of premium collectible cards that related to the online content. Consumers had the option to either purchase the collectibles or just enjoy the web-based experience, but it would be much more interesting for them to do both (Phillips, 23). While the format can be used for marketing purposes, what makes transmedia so unique is that the art form itself can be an advertisement. The concept of creating transmedia content in the world of traditional media has worked wonders for franchises like *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*.

In the past few years, new digital technologies have been introduced to the consumer market that unlock more potential for transmedia. Such technologies include the likes of virtual reality, augmented reality, and widespread high-speed Internet, giving millions of people easy access to share their own high quality content with the world. As a promotion for the 2017 film *Blade Runner: 2049*, the creative team at Magnopus created a virtual reality film called *Blade Runner: Memory Lab*. The 25-minute interactive short tells the story of a replicant, played by the viewer, who has gone off-script and is now under investigation by Wallace Corp. In an Ars Technica review for the film, editor Sam Machkovech states that while the narrative is slightly disappointing, the overall project opens up the floodgates for future VR projects that will push the boundaries of online storytelling (Machkovech, 1). With the technology to create true cinematic virtual reality (Mateer, 14), transmedia storytelling has now become a hybrid of both online and offline entertainment. In a few years time, however, where exactly will transmedia be in the world of New Media?
Background/Related Work

Independent content creators now have the ability to create an allotment of content, self-distribute that content directly to millions of people, and grow a dedicated fanbase of users that are yearning for the next piece of the puzzle. The barriers between creator and consumer have shattered, as social networks like Twitter and Facebook have made interactions between the two parties instantaneous. Fans can contribute to a project by tweeting out feedback to the creators and even upload their own user-generated content. Peter Pynta, the director of marketing for the company Neuro-Insight, discusses the effect of social media on viewer engagement in the article “The Power of Social Television: Can Social Media Build Viewer Engagement? A New Approach to Brain Imaging of Viewer Immersion.” According to Pynta, a recent study has found that consumers are heavily engaged in multi-screen interactivity over traditional single screen experiences. He claims that for marketers, this is a great opportunity to create advertisements on several types of media platforms that all complement one another and hook potential customers (Pynta, 78). While Pynta views this discovery from a monetary standpoint, this study also supports transmedia creators that are trying to innovate. If this study is further analyzed and utilized in real-world scenarios, there might be a chance that viewers will be watching shows and movies on two screens simultaneously, with each screen showing a different image from the other that supplements the overall narrative being told.

With the advent of online transmedia creation, different formats of media that traditionally have not gone together are now being paired with one another. A good example of this would be actor, writer, and musician Donald Glover’s (under his hip-hop alias Childish Gambino) 2013 album, Because the Internet. Although general listeners could just tune in and
listen to the project as a traditional music release, dedicated fans were given an overarching narrative experience that was injected into the album, as well as several other creations produced by Glover: a short film titled *Clapping for the Wrong Reasons*, a plethora of story-based music videos, and a 75-page screenplay under the same title as the album, *Because the Internet*, that actually utilizes the album as a soundtrack (Kramer, 1). Although the project is fairly recent, there have been major technological jumps since this release. It could be possible for other creators now and in the future to take Glover’s transmedia techniques to the next level by using these new technologies for their own work.

**Methods**

For my research project, I intend to answer these questions about transmedia by going straight to the source. My plan is to, with the help of my mentor, Sue Scheibler, get into contact with transmedia creators across Los Angeles over the course of 2018, ask them questions about the present-day transmedia industry, analyze their current approaches to engaging with audiences, and conclude whether or not the industry is on the cusp of going through an online-exclusive renaissance. As I go through the process of interviewing the content creators, I will be filming my experiences and compiling together creators’ commentary into a mini-documentary on transmedia storytelling. The documentary will be split up into three chronological sections: past, present, future. Each of these sections will focus on (depending on circumstance) one or a handful of companies that have experience in the realm of transmedia storytelling.
Expected Results

As an undergraduate film production student at LMU and an aspiring transmedia creator, this research will help me prepare for my post-graduate career. By knowing the direction in which the transmedia industry is going, I will work on specializing my filmmaking expertise to cater to that direction. By the end of this research project, I will have a deeper knowledge of transmedia and will be able to share that knowledge to consumer and content creators worldwide through my mini-documentary.

Conclusion

Transmedia storytelling has had a huge influence on the way the public consumes stories. Through franchises like Star Wars and Harry Potter, audiences have been given new ways to engage with the fictional worlds they care about most. With New Media becoming commercialized worldwide, fans will be able to engage with beloved characters like never before. “Transmedia Storytelling in the Age of New Media” is a research project that acts as an ode to past and current transmedia creators, a preview for consumers as to what exciting content is in store for the future, and a motivator for up-and-coming creators (including myself) to think outside of the box when it comes to worldbuilding.
Works Cited

Branagan, Liam. "‘Look Around’ Viewing: Virtual Reality at Sydney Film Festival 2017."


Mateer, John. "Directing for Cinematic Virtual Reality: How the Traditional Film Director’s Craft Applies to Immersive Environments and Notions of Presence." Journal of Media...


Budget

NOTE: The rental prices are budgeted for three weekends. Prices are subject to change depending on rental house used.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Item</th>
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Estimated Budget: $1900

Schedule
Pre-Production: January-February 2018
Production: March-April 2018
Post Production and Delivery: Summer 2018